

# Media Portrayal and Anthropologists' Treatment of Ishi, the Last Yahi

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## Introduction

In 1911, an aboriginal “wild man” walked into the twentieth century white man's world. I will describe how the media of those days portrayed the last wild Native American, Ishi, and I will propose some possible reasons why he was portrayed that way. Anthropology was a relatively new subject then, and Alfred Kroeber was a rising star in California. He was the sponsor of Ishi. I will describe some possible motivations of Kroeber before and after his time with Ishi, based on what I have been able to find out about mankind in general and Alfred Kroeber in particular.

## Background Information:

In August of 1911, an emaciated man walked into a slaughterhouse near Oroville, California, where he was discovered and turned over to the local sheriff. Nobody could understand his language. It was likely that he was one of the Deer Creek Indians (also known as Mill Creek Indians), who had been thought to be extinct until a surveyor's party had literally stumbled across their hiding place two years before, but how could anyone tell who he was since nobody could understand him? (*Heizer and T. Kroeber*: 92).

The first professor of the new Anthropology department at Berkeley, Alfred L. Kroeber, sent an associate, Thomas T. Waterman, with a list of words of a nearby tribe thought to be related to the “wild man” (*Riffe and Roberts*, 1992). Some communication was possible, but not much because the “wild man” was the last of his tribe, and the other tribe's language was not the same as his. Eventually, the Bureau of Indian Affairs gave permission for this man to go to the museum in San Francisco to be studied. The “wild man,” now called Ishi, became a popular sensation. He lived several years at the museum, even working as a janitor there to earn his own keep, before dying of tuberculosis in 1916.

## Ishi's character

All who spent time with him grew to respect Ishi's character. Ishi spent much time with Saxton Pope, an instructor at the University Medical School. Dr. Pope said of Ishi, “His affability and pleasant disposition made him a universal favorite” (*Heizer and T. Kroeber*: 225). T. T. Waterman described Ishi in this way: “He had...an inborn considerateness, that surpassed in fineness most of the civilized breeding with which I am familiar” (*Heizer and Whipple*: 293). When Ishi died, Waterman said: “He was the best friend I had in the world” (*Riffe and Roberts*). When the film by Jed Riffe and Pamela Roberts shows Ishi leaving Oroville at the train station in 1911, the narrator says: “I would have liked to have had some more time with him. I always thought there was something there I should know, that I would like to know.”

What impresses me the most is how Ishi showed no bitterness towards the white people who had slaughtered his people. There were many massacres. I was especially sickened to hear of the Kingsley Cave massacre in 1871, in which one of the white men switched from a rifle to a revolver "because the rifle tore them up so bad, particularly the babies" (*Riffe and Roberts*). It is difficult for me to believe that these same white men were local heroes in their community. It makes me ashamed to be a human being.

## How the media portrayed him

The newspaper reporters were angry when the Indian wouldn't tell them his name or anything about his past. When I think of how his people were massacred, it angers me that they asked him to talk about it. Even if Ishi had shared his private memories, I am fairly sure the newspapers would not have dared to print the truth for fear of offending their white readers. After all, their primary job is to sell papers, not to report the truth! According to a textbook by Garbarino and Sasso, in the culture of all California Indians the names of the dead were never mentioned (196). The film by Riffe and Roberts says that Ishi believed that if the dead spirits hear their names, they might take it as a summons.

We never did learn his name for himself. Kroeber wrote in "Ishi, the Last Aborigine": "The strongest Indian etiquette...demands that a person shall never tell his own name, at least not in reply to a direct request" (Kroeber: 12). Kroeber called him Ishi, which means "man" in Yana, and that is all we know him by. Thomas Merton wrote a meditation on the subject of Ishi and the disappearance of the Yahi Indians, which concludes: "In the end, no one ever found out a single name of the vanished community. Not even Ishi's. For Ishi simply means MAN." (32).

However, the newspapers did not even give Ishi credit for being human. For example, the San Francisco Examiner of August 30, 1911 said this about him: "He is a savage of the most primitive type" (Heizer and T. Kroeber: 96). Grant Wallace was a reporter for the San Francisco Sunday Call, who arranged for Ishi to go to the Orpheum Theater. Afterwards, the edition of October 8, 1911 had a fanciful account of Ishi's reaction to the show (Heizer and T. Kroeber: 107). This account was apparently made up from the reporter's imagination. Professor Kroeber remembered things differently, that what fascinated Ishi was not the show or the lady singer but the sheer number of people in the audience (*Riffe and Roberts*).

## Reasons for the media portrayal of him

I believe the newspapers had to call Ishi primitive in order to rationalize what the white man did to the Indians. Rationalization is a psychological defense to justify one's doing terrible things. The process is unconscious (*Lindgren and Byrne*: 242). Once it becomes conscious, it no longer works.

One way to rationalize terrible behavior towards other people is to dehumanize them. This frequently happens in wartime propaganda, when one calls the enemy a gook instead of a person. I believe this is why the media described Ishi as savage. The newspaper writers honestly believed what they wrote, because they honestly believed that the white man's race and culture were superior to all

others. As Reynolds *et al.* point out in their work on ethnocentrism, this delusional self-aggrandizement or “chosen-people complex” is not uncommon human behavior. Thomas Merton says: “The Yahi, or Mill Creek Indians, as they were called, were marked for complete destruction. Hence they were regarded as subhuman.” (26).

## Manifest Destiny

There was also the concept of *Manifest Destiny*, the idea that “America was destined by God to expand its boundaries” (Current *et. al.*: 375). It was popularized by the new “penny press” newspapers during the 1840s (375) and revived during the 1890s when the European powers were carving up the world between them (599). These ideas were justified by religious and political ideals of the time. John W. Burgess, who founded Columbia University’s School of Political Science, said in 1890: “There is no human right to the status of barbarism” (599).

## Protestant Christianity

Even before Manifest Destiny crystallized as a concept, some Protestant Christians in America had the idea of an ordeal in the wilderness as a test of their faith. The ordeal is to be a time of physical or spiritual suffering to separate truth from falsity. Many saw Native American peoples as hopelessly lost to evil, and therefore the enemy (Hooker).

## “The White Man’s Burden”

Another reason for the media’s portrayal of Ishi as a savage was the popular concept of “The White Man’s Burden.” Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem in 1899 that warned of the cost of imperialism (Zwick). Ironically, the American imperialists took this poem as a rallying cry, believing that it somehow turned the conquest of native peoples into something noble instead of an abomination. In addition to expanding American influence overseas, Euro-Americans wanted to make the Native Americans over in their own image.

## The End of the Trail

While much of early Euro-American history reacts with fear to the Wild Indian, by the time Ishi was discovered this picture had started to change. Now, the Indian was seen as a romanticized tragic figure (Riffe and Roberts). One of the most photographed sculptures at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition was “The End of the Trail” by James Earle Fraser. It was at the entrance to the Court of Palms (Todd: 334). It shows a Native American drooping over his spent pony. Ishi was also an “exhibit” at this exposition (Riffe and Roberts).

## Alfred Kroeber’s motives

Kroeber was into “Salvage ethnography” (Riffe and Roberts), trying to write down descriptions of Native American cultures before the elders died along with their traditions. Kroeber explains his motives in *The Mill Creek Indians and Ishi*: “A record of their wanderings, their vigilance, their traits and habits, would appeal to

the historian, while a knowledge of their ancient institutions and traditions, preserved from purely aboriginal times into the Twentieth Century, would be a rich mine to the ethnologist and anthropologist of the future" (Kroeber: 9).

Kroeber was young and ambitious, and when he heard about the Wild Man of Oroville, "he had found the Indian he was looking for" (Riffe and Roberts). An example of Kroeber's initial attitude towards Ishi is in the telegram he sent to the noted linguist Edward Sapir on September 6, 1911: "Have totally wild Indian at the museum. Do you want to come and work him up?" (Riffe and Roberts). Kroeber studied Ishi for several years. Ishi called him his Big Chiep [Chief].

## Kroeber After Ishi

Kroeber was in Europe when Ishi died. On March 24, 1916, Kroeber sent a letter to E. W. Gifford to try to stop any autopsy in respect to Ishi's wishes. As Kroeber put it, "Science can go to hell. We propose to stand by our friends." (Heizer and T. Kroeber: 240). Contrast this with the content of the earlier telegram to Sapir, and it seems Kroeber's attitude has changed. It was too late. An autopsy was performed, and Ishi's brain was removed before his body was cremated.

After Ishi's death, Kroeber went into psychoanalysis for two years before returning to his work. I believe he was doing some serious soul-searching about the ethics of his work. Even though he went on to become the first great California anthropologist, he never in his lifetime published another word about Ishi, and when he spoke of him it was "with feelings of deep loss" (Riffe and Roberts).

## Conclusion

I'm no expert at psychology, but the motives of the newspaper reporters seem pretty clear to me. First off, they wanted to sell papers, so they wrote what the public wanted to read. Secondly, they were part of a culture that believed the Native Americans to be inferior, so this was inevitably reflected in their descriptions of these people.

I am less sure about Kroeber's motives, but here is what I think. His goal was scholarly, but he was severely shaken when he finally realized that Ishi was a person instead of an object. What made it even worse for Kroeber was how good a person Ishi was. Ishi had desirable character traits, and I am sure that his white companions learned more from him than just Yahi culture. I think they also learned more about how to be human.

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